November 21, 1975

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CHINA

Since coming to power in 1949, the communists have worked with some success to overcome the traditional Chinese belief that "women are inferior to men." Most women work, out of economic necessity, and they are encouraged to do so not only by their families but by the government. Women can be found in virtually all professions -- about half of the doctors in China are women -- and some effort is being made to narrow the wage disparity between men and women. In recent years, the Chinese have also gone out of their way to insure that women are amply represented among the relatively few students selected for entrance into universities.

The Chinese have devoted somewhat more attention to women's issues this year in part because this is International Women's Year. The extent to which Chinese propaganda insists that men and women are equal and that women should be paid equal pay for equal work is an indication, however, that the deeply rooted belief in women's inferiority has yet to be overcome among large segments of the male population.

Although women have long been much in evidence in the labor force, only in recent years has Peking made a concerted effort to recruit women into the ruling communist party and to give them positions of some responsibility. At the grassroots level -- in factories, farms, the neighborhoods and on street party committees -- women party members frequently outnumber men and often are the most important political leaders in their area.

There are fewer women at the higher echelons of the party apparatus, but in recent years women have been better represented than ever before. Women comprise over ten percent of the party central committee, which was elected in 1973 and has about 300 members. This is perhaps the largest number of women ever to be elected to such an important party organization.

The Women's Federation, a national organization that comes under the direct control of the party central committee, deals exclusively with matters affecting women. The Women's Federation, however, is not a lobby on behalf of women's rights nor does it play a policymaking role. Rather, it is an instrument through which the party organizes women throughout the country to convey and implement policies relating to women. Foremost among these is a rather stringent birth control policy, which prevents young couples from marrying until they have reached the required age, limits the number of children a couple may have, and in some cases imposes compulsory sterilization after the birth of the third or fourth child. The Women's Federation is probably used at lower levels to help educate women about birth control devices, which are dispensed with no charge.

The Women's Federation, like most other organizations was dismantled during the Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960s. Women's groups have been reestablished at local levels, but the national organization has not yet officially been reestablished. Earlier this year, Peking announced plans to hold a national women's congress to elect a new Women's Federation at the national level. The congress has not yet been convened, but several women who are married to important party officials seem to be acting as officers in the Women's Federation.

Most women at the top level of the political hierarchy are wives of important party officials. Many of these women enjoy considerable prestige in the party because of their long standing service to the party and because they fought alongside their husbands during China's civil war. Among the most highly respected women in China is Teng Ying-chao, wife of Premier Chou En-lai. Teng is a member of the party central committee and a former vice-chairman of the Women's Federation.

The wives of Chinese political leaders frequently hold official positions of their own, most often in the government bureaucracy that exists alongside the party structure. Their political fortunes usually parallel those of their husbands. A case in point is Cho Lin, wife of senior Vice Premier Teng Hsiao-ping. Cho Lin currently holds an unspecified position in the government, but when her husband fell on hard times in the mid-1960s, both Mr. and Mrs. Teng were removed from the political scene. The public profile of such women is often a clue to the status of their husbands. As Vice Premier Teng's power and prestige have grown in the past two years, the public appearances of his wife have increased.

Although most politically important women are either married to or have close personal ties to powerful men, a few women with no such connections appear to have made it to the top ranks of the political hierarchy on their own. This is a rather recent phenomenon but is likely to continue, given Peking's determination to bring more women into political positions. One such woman is Wu Kuei-hsien, the only woman among China's 12 vice premiers and a member of the party's ruling politburo, who was only a factory worker until she came

to the attention of party leaders in Peking a few years ago. Wu has met with visiting women's delegations, suggesting she may play a role in the new Women's Federation; and she appears to have some limited foreign policy functions as well.

Another newly prominent woman is Li Su-wen who led China's delegation to the International Women's Conference in Mexico earlier this year. Li holds the relatively unimportant position of a vice chairman of the National People's Congress, China's legislature, but the job has brought her to Peking from her home in northeast China and has put her into the limelight. Now that she holds a position in the national leadership, she is frequently called upon to meet with foreign visitors. As a member of the party central committee, she, too, may ultimately play a role in the reconstructed Women's Federation.

Of the women who are included in the national leadership in Peking, only one has ever become a political power in her own right. This is Chiang Ching, wife of party chairman Mao Tse-tung, who was initially brought into politics by Mao in the mid-1960s. Since that time, however, she has established her own political following among the party's left wing and a power base of her own in cultural circles throughout China. She enjoyed her greatest power during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960s, but her persistent and vocal opposition to policies since that time has brought her into conflict with most other political leaders, including her husband. She made an abortive attempt last year to establish herself as the logical successor to Mao, but her political power has now been sharply eroded due in large part to Mao's displeasure with her often disruptive political antics.

Although Chiang Ching is perhaps the only example of a blatantly ambitious woman in modern times, China has a long history of politically ambitious women. Several of imperial China's most ruthless and notorious leaders in centuries past have been women, and it is no accident that ordinary Chinese people have often compared Chiang Ching to such women. These unfavorable comparisons, coupled with the unhappy history of women rulers and the continuing influence of traditional attitudes, suggest that prospects for the elevation of a woman to the top position in the hierarchy are quite limited.

Next 11 Page(s) In Document Exempt

Approved For Release 2004/12/21 : CIA-RDP79R01142A001100040002-1